



## UEN Legislative Priorities for 2021 Session

Approved Nov. 5, 2020

**Invest in Iowa's Future:** Public schools educate a diverse workforce with the skills necessary to fuel our future. Adequate funding is required to:

- fulfill the goal of restoring Iowa's first in the nation education status,
- deliver world-class learning results for all students,
- prepare creative, caring and motivated citizens,
- close learning gaps to support excellence in Iowa's diverse economy,
- develop a world-class workforce to secure Iowa's economic future, and
- recruit, retain and reward Iowa's school staff and educators of today and the future.

The cost per pupil must be sufficient to fuel school districts and AEAs and must be set no lower than 3.75% for the 2022 school year to form a strong foundation for Iowa schools to educate all students.

A strong school finance system is based on the principles of primacy, adequacy, equity, and flexibility. Iowa's investment in public education should mirror economic growth and make up for shortfalls when the economy is robust. UEN school leaders appreciate the continued commitment to 2.3% SSA and transportation/formula equity investments for the 2020-21 school year, even after COVID-19 began to negatively impact state revenues. As the economy rebounds, Iowa students depend on the state to increase investments in education to make up for learning loss and other expenditures associated with pandemic recovery not accounted for in prior years' budgets. Iowa's future depends on a stable and balanced tax policy that generates enough money to fund Iowa's priority of educating our children.

A strong system requires a diversified revenue portfolio. New state resources must supplement, not supplant existing resources. Increased state funding for schools must increase spending authority rather than simply using the school aid formula as a vehicle for property tax relief. Iowa's 31<sup>st</sup> in the nation ranking of local school funding as a percent of total education revenues demonstrates that our revenue portfolio is out of balance.

**Student Opportunity Equity (Close the Gap):** Equity requires a needs-driven formula that funds programs for low-income, non-English speaking, and at-risk students.

Iowa's funding formula has not kept pace with the changing needs of Iowa students. The formula must recognize the disproportionate cost of providing equal educational opportunities to students from low-income families. School districts should be granted spending authority for Free/Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) eligible students' fees mandated to be waived by state and federal law. The COVID-19 experience has also shown us glaring differences among student home support. This includes both the ability to engage in learning based on lack of internet connectivity, as well as the inability of some working parents to stay home to support required continuous learning. Experts anticipate a COVID-19 ripple effect will increase achievement gaps. UEN supports full attention to and implementation of the December 2019 School Finance Interim Committee recommendation to study the impact of poverty on educational outcomes, including other states' formulas that provide resources for students from low-

income families, which are showing successful student achievement outcomes for at-risk students. [HF 2490](#) Poverty Weighting Study was approved with strong bipartisan support in the House Education Committee in the 2020 Session and serves as a good starting point for continued conversation.

Early investment increases access to quality preschool programs which prevent higher costs later. Barriers to preschool access must be eliminated, and schools must have the funding and flexibility to provide preschool and wrap-around services for a full day, prioritizing high-need students first. UEN supports poverty and English-language learner weightings for preschool students and formula protections against the negative budget and program impacts of preschool enrollment swings.

In addition to a poverty weighting in the Formula, UEN calls for resolution of other Formula inequities, including the elimination of the \$155 district cost per pupil difference within 9 years and correcting the perverse proration formula for the Instructional Support Program by providing funding over the long term and spending authority in the meantime.

The proration formula established for Iowa's Instructional Support Program years ago assumed full state funding. With zero state share, that formula has a perverse impact on resources for districts with low property value and low-income families, which actually require more, not fewer resources for instructional support. The proration formula is outdated, given strong systems in place to promote property tax equity and relief over the last decade. All school districts should be able to access the full instructional support amount approved by their voters or their school boards going forward.

**Teacher, Administrator and Staff Shortage:** Adequate funding is essential for public schools to compete with the private sector for employees. Licensure reciprocity with other states enacted in the 2020 Session is a great start. In addition to adequate base funding, other steps must be taken to help schools meet the challenge of attracting and retaining tomorrow's educators and recruiting teachers that mirror the diversity in our students, including flexibility in certification requirements, acceptance of alternate evidence such as experience for Iowa licensure, loan-forgiveness for shortage areas or high-needs schools, creation of a public service track within Iowa's CTE plan, creative grow-our-own programs and a strong IPERS and employee benefits system.

**Mental Health Services:** Iowa must fund services, eliminate barriers, and clarify funding sources and responsibilities, including critical partnerships and wrap-around services. Enabling the delivery of mental health services, when appropriate for students, via telehealth, enacted in the 2020 Session, is a good first step. Additional State efforts are needed to establish and fund comprehensive community mental health systems to offer preventative and treatment services and comprehensive school mental health programs that include in-school access for students to mental health professionals, provisions for reimbursement by Medicaid and private insurers, and programs to fill in gaps for students without coverage. In addition, funding for additional and ongoing teacher, administrator, and support staff training to improve the awareness and understanding of child emotional and mental health needs is needed. Additional mental health services for our school staff are also required. Schools should not be mandated to screen for mental health needs or provide mental services without adequate funding to do so.

**District Authority:** School boards are responsible for making decisions on behalf of their students, staff and communities to meet the goals of their district. UEN believes that those locally elected leaders closest to the community care most about those impacted by their decision making and are in the best position to determine the best interest of students, staff and stakeholders. Local school boards are accountable to those who elect them. In education policy, one size does not fit all school districts, classrooms or students. District leaders need maximum flexibility to provide a great education to all students. The state role is to define what outcomes are necessary for all students, leaving flexibility to schools in expenditures and policy to best determine how to deliver those intended outcomes. Statutory Home Rule, articulated in Iowa Code 274.3, gives locally elected school boards broad and implied authority. The Legislature, the Governor/executive branch and the courts should follow the law and liberally construe the Iowa Code and legislation to effectuate local control.

**Public School Priority:** Our public schools are well designed to provide a range of choices for parents and students. UEN believes that Iowa law provides sufficient choice through public schools, public charter schools, open enrollment, homeschool assistance, independent private instruction, post-secondary enrollment options, public virtual academies, and nonpublic school alternatives. Additional tax credits towards nonpublic tuition for investments in options without oversight are not necessary to provide choice to the families in Iowa. Education supported by public funds, including property taxes, state aid or federal monies, should be held to the same governance and educational standards as public schools. The state should provide full funding to public schools to meet the evolving needs of public school students before increasing financial supports for private schools. Additionally, federal legislation and rules should require grant funding distribution methods and resources to fully meet public school students' needs before providing additional resources to private schools.

**Remote Learning and Instructional Time:** UEN supports the ability for local leaders to determine when in-person learning is not advised, for emergency situations and safety, including but not limited to weather cancellations, emergency infrastructure conditions, or for purposes of public health, as long as engagement in virtual learning opportunities is required for students and staff and the needs of all students are anticipated and met. Local leaders know and are committed to providing additional attention to those students and staff who may need more support during virtual learning opportunities. Under such conditions, instructional time delivered during required virtual learning counts toward minimum instructional days or hours.

**Internet Connectivity and Access:** UEN supports continued state and federal efforts at expanding access to high-speed internet to all Iowans for student and staff access to critically needed information. Access to virtual learning and information is required for students to fully experience quality STEM programs, required virtual learning and the extraordinary array of information and resources available to promote full student engagement in 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning. The quality of life, workforce readiness, entrepreneurship and access to a whole host of critical services depend on citizen access to high-speed internet. UEN supports incentives, investments, and creative solutions to close the technology gap for all students, their families, businesses and community members in Iowa. Lack of sufficient income should not be a barrier to internet access for our students and families.